

# Unconventional Gifted: Noah's Story

May 7, 2018 by Terry Bradley

If a student doesn't turn in homework, doesn't like school, and gets mostly B's and C's, can he still be gifted?

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it still make a sound?

## **Meaning Is More Important Than Grades To Noah**

There are a multitude of reasons why gifted students don't make good grades in school. Let's explore one scenario through the eyes of Noah. As a senior, Noah has endured four years of high school classes that he was not interested in, but was required to take in order to graduate. He is perfectly capable of earning A's, but since he isn't interested in the classes he can't motivate himself to do the work necessary to get A's.

But Noah IS interested in other things. What he IS interested in is being involved in his Jewish youth group, serving as an elected Regional Song Leader in a Jewish leadership program, writing services and programs for his Temple, and playing his guitar. Because he is so passionate about these things, he signed up to take a Hebrew class at the local university. Learning Hebrew is something he is interested in because he sees that it is directly meaningful to his future. He has earned a high A in his university Hebrew class because he loves learning the language, so he is motivated to do the work. He knows he will be able to apply this learning to his future college major and career, and might even go on to Rabbinical school. He has more friends in his university class than in his high school classes. It is often easier to make friends when you are happy because you have more freedom to be yourself.

## **Why Noah Isn't Motivated**

Noah not being motivated to get good grades in high school boils down to two main reasons: apathy and rebellion. Here are some of his thoughts:

“Nobody can tell me when I'm going to use this information in my life. What real world application does this have? If my teachers can't answer these questions, then I'm having to learn it just for the test, and not because it's useful in life. That just doesn't make sense.”

“I know what I can spend my time doing that is actually going to benefit me in my lifetime. Hebrew is specific to my interests and I'm motivated by what I'm learning in Hebrew, it's not about the grade, but I'm doing really well. There's real world application for me.”

“I'm not invested in my high school classes. Colleges might be underwhelmed by my high school transcript, but at the same time I'm getting an A in my college class so I've proven that I can be successful at the college level. That should tell them what I can do when I'm interested.”

“I know that if I wanted to go to a prestigious college, I’d have to play the game in high school in order to look good for colleges, but why would I want to go to a highly competitive school that would require me to do a lot of the same kinds of work that I already don’t want to do? I was never in that mindset. I seek balance. Doing social things is as important as academics to me. That’s overlooked. I think people need to value social things, and balance, more in their lives.”

“My parents are not necessarily pleased about my grades but they also can’t explain to me about the real-world application of the information I’m learning in my high school classes.”

Noah’s identity is not tied to how he does in his high school classes (calculus, senior literature, chemistry, Spanish). Investment in these classes is OUR societal prescribed formula for balance and success, not his. He sees beyond these expectations, beyond the facade of other’s values versus his own. He is an independent thinker, and he seeks to fulfill his own values and interests. He resists “the system” because he doesn’t buy in to what it has to offer him.

Knowing what Noah finds meaningful and interesting, it’s not a far stretch to see how calculus and Spanish classes don’t hold a similar interest. The work seems meaningless to him. He chooses not to do class assignments as a way of expressing anger and quiet rebellion over having to do something he finds boring, insignificant, and forced.

“There’s so much emphasis on the fact that your grades are going to influence everything you do beyond high school and that you have to excel in high school, “says Noah. “I just don’t believe that’s true. I get that you still have to graduate and leave with that slip of paper, but you don’t have to be pushed into the mold that schools and parents are expecting. I don’t think that the grades you get in high school are as important as the fact that you earned your high school diploma.”

### **What Are Noah’s Options After He Graduates High School?**

For some gifted students like Noah, heading off to a community college after high school can be a better option than a four year college. But this pathway in life is often frowned upon for gifted kids. For students who want a four year degree, but don’t want rigorously competitive environments, community college can be a way to start out at a slower pace that also allows time for other pursuits.

Noah plans to get his required classes taken care of in community college and then transfer into a four year college. He reminds me that college is a choice, high school is not, and that it makes a big difference to have his college experience be HIS choice, not his parents’ choice, or state law requirements.

Noah has advice to parents of teens who feel like he does about high school: give back some control. “Your kids need to be the ones making decisions. They will be happier. Don’t assume parents always know best. Sometimes it’s futile to try to get teens to change. Agree to disagree. Support their different pathways. Students often learn even less when they are forced into parental expectations of high grades and high level classes. They can shut down, and then it’s a lose-lose for everyone,” says Noah.

Noah also has advice for students: Find something you love doing. “If you’re not interested in anything, you’ll shut down. If you have something you are passionate about it will be easier to want to go to school to learn about it, and that gives you something to look forward to. If nothing holds your interest, then search until you find something that does. And then balance the things you love with the things you have to do. You need to have something to look forward to. It may just be that you find what really interests you outside of school rather than inside of school, like I did,” says Noah.

### **Is Noah an Underachiever or a Selective Consumer?**

Gifted expert Jim Delisle reminds us that many of the kids we call “underachievers” are actually “selective consumers.” He challenges us to find the thing(s) that they are spending their time on that engages them. Generally, there is something they are successful at that they are invested in. It may just happen to be different than what we would like them to be spending their time on, like school and homework.

Delisle says that, in regards to mental health issues that many of our students are facing, “the counter-culture kids are not in as much trouble as the kids who are complying. In many instances, we need to help kids find their counter-culture movement.” In his book, *Doing Poorly On Purpose*, Delisle talks about smart kids who get poor grades, not because they’re unable to do better in school but because they don’t want to. We need to support them in finding something they do care about doing well. This also preserves their dignity.

Noah may be an unconventional gifted learner, but he is not an underachiever. He is a “selective consumer” who has found what he wants to devote his time and attention to. And isn’t that a positive thing to be respected and celebrated? We want our children to become independent thinkers, but when their pathways differ from what we want for them, we often struggle with accepting their choices. Let’s keep an open mind to seeing and hearing who our children are at their core. Sometimes, they really do know best.